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In March of 1944, the Nazis invaded Hungary with the announced purpose of finishing the liquidation of the last remaining Jewish community in Europe. By this date, 5 million Jews had been taken to the gas chambers. Of 900,000 Hungarian Jews, approximately 250,000 were in Budapest penned in ghettos and star-marked houses. For four years nothing was done by the western world. Finally, the American War Refugee Board acted to coordinate a rescue effort to save this last remnant of the Jewish population in Europe. The American government asked Sweden, a neutral nation, to help locate a person who would be willing to go to Hungary to organize a rescue mission. Raoul Wallenberg, American educated son of a distinguished Swedish family, volunteered. Armed with Swedish diplomatic papers, the 32 year old Wallenberg went to Budapest as Secretary of the Legation. Support funds and directives for his work were provided by the War Refugee Board through Iver Olsen and Ambassador Herschel Johnson.

Wallenberg printed Swedish passports of his own design and distributed them to thousands of Jews. With incomparable courage he faced Nazi soldiers and death squads; he followed the death marches and went daily to the deportation trains where he literally pulled people out of the clutches of the Nazis, repeatedly risking his own life. He purchased and rented scores of houses in Budapest, equipped them with Swedish flags, and personally protected the refugees from the onslaught of the Nazis and the Arrow Cross. Altogether, he is credited with saving the lives of up to 100,000 victims. Congressman Tom Lantos, then 16 years old, and his wife-to-be, Annette Tilleman, were among those saved.

In 1945, as the war ended, Russian troops occupied Budapest. Wallenberg, taken into custody by the Soviet military, was imprisoned unaccountably in direct violation of his diplomatic immunity. He was never released. At first, the Russians acknowledged taking him into protective custody; six months later they denied any knowledge of him. Evidence began to accumulate in Sweden about Wallenberg's presence in the Gulag, reported by former inmates of Russian prisons who were released and at great risk to their own lives made their way to Sweden. In response to Swedish inquiries, in 1957 Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko asserted a man named "Walenberg" was taken prisoner in Hungary but died of a heart attack in July, 1947 in prison. Stalin and others were blamed for this mistake. Despite overwhelming evidence by former Russian prisoners that they had seen or spoken with Wallenberg during the years 1947-1980, the Russians continue to maintain their position of silence on the case.

As recently as January, 1981, thirty-six years after his abduction, at an international hearing in Stockholm, witnesses from the Soviet Union report that Wallenberg is alive in Spets Korpus in the Gorkij prison region.

Raoul Wallenberg's mission, in retrospect, has proven to be a unique contribution in the history of the salvation of European Jews from the massacre; and as such he has become, for millions of people, a symbol of our deepest humanitarian values.

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